



The Invisible Made Visible

Mark 1:4-11 & Acts 19:1-7

A sermon by William M. Klein

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1 While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the interior regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. **2** He said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" They replied, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." **3** Then he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" They answered, "Into John's baptism." **4** Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus." **5** On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. **6** When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied— **7** altogether there were about twelve of them. (Acts 19:1-7 NRSV)

4 John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. **5** And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. **6** Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. **7** He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. **8** I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." **9** In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. **10** And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. **11** And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." (Mk. 1:4-11 NRSV)

1

It is not hard to think about things that drive us crazy about the church. After all, the church is made up of ordinary people...quirky people, intense people, annoying people, delightful people, passive people, aggressive people...folks who faithfully file into the pew every Sunday but never say a word...and folks who do not have an unspoken thought. It really does "take all kinds" to make a church...literally.

What I want us to consider today, though, is not what drives us daffy about the church. I want us to consider how the church can be one of God's gifts. I want us to consider the church as it was meant to be and can be. For, the true church, which is to say, the church as it was meant to be, is a powerful and magnificent tribute to the glory of God.

2

So...has such a creature ever existed? Has any church ever become the community Jesus envisioned – the community worthy of his life, death, and resurrection?

The short answer is "yes." There are proofs a plenty across this planet and in our own congregation. So as not to embarrass any of you, though,...let me tell you about another church. Lutheran pastor, Heidi Neumark tells a story made possible because of the witness of one such church. I've told you this story before and I'll probably tell it again.

1

A woman named Angie enrolled in a two-year Synod-wide Christian leadership class. Everyone in the class had to give a presentation on why he or she was Lutheran.

One night, the student assigned to present was absent, and the pastor teaching the class asked if anyone would be willing to step in. No one was, because they didn't have their written papers at hand since it wasn't their turn. Evidently they needed their notes to remind them of why they were Lutheran. Not Angie. Her paper wasn't prepared, but she was.

She got a glass of water and set it in front of her. Then she slowly opened a Mary Kay jewelry case and took out a pink pouch which was filled with multicolored pills. She took out about 10 pills and swallowed them, one by one, in silence. The class was riveted by this unusual theological presentation. When the last pill was swallowed, Angie stood up. "That's my HIV medication," she said. "I'm Lutheran because the church welcomed me as I am, an HIV- positive, recovering addict, and a child of God filled with grace. Taking care of my health is part of my stewardship. Now, by the grace of God I want to live. I want to live for my son. I want to live for the people still out there on the streets as I was. I want to live because Jesus Christ lives in me and through me. It's not just my body anymore. I'm part of his body, a temple of the Holy Spirit."¹

I believe it was because of the integrity of her home church that Angie trusted Jesus came for people like her. That church helped her know at a very deep level Jesus' endless affection for folks who needed him sins, warts, and all.

3

Our readings for today have us consider Jesus' baptism...and give us a taste for what it means to be bathed in his baptism. I want to suggest the church exists where and when the people who are the church cherish their baptism.

What does it mean to "cherish one's baptism?" I think it happens when people are inspired (i.e., in-Spirit) enough and insightful enough to realize they do not deserve to be joined to Christ through baptism...that they don't deserve it any more than anyone else. This insight causes them to cherish this gift they do not deserve...and helps evolve them into people around whom others feel welcomed, valued, cared for.

Writer Anne Lamott believes baptism is at the heart of what it means to be Christian.

Most of what we do in worldly life is geared toward staying dry, looking good, not going under. But in baptism...you agree to do something that's a little sloppy because at the same time it's also holy and absurd. It's about surrender, giving in to all those things we can't control; it's a willingness to let go of balance and decorum and get drenched.²

I like Anne Lamott's irreverent reverence. She reminds us that church does not appeal much to people who care about looking good. Church is for people who know they need something only God can give. They seem to realize God's delivery system involves what happens when people gather as church...i.e., as they are engaged in worship, fellowship, prayer, educational instruction, mutual support, and mission. Or as writer John Garvey put it so well...when they embrace the self-emptying that real gratitude and true worship entail.³

2

How many times have we heard someone say, "The church is not a haven for saints; it's a hospital for sinners"? We hear it, we say it...but I'm not sure we believe it. I say this because too often I find that when church members are faced with a troubling dilemma or an embarrassing moral failing they stay away from church. But the church is the very place they need to be...IF the church is to be the type of community Jesus envisioned.

The odd assortment of ordinary people who make up the church is God's gift...and baptism into Jesus' humiliating death is our way into that gift. If we only come to church when life is good then we do not understand what God's gift is all about. And we miss the wholeness and healing God intends.

4

Our text is about Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River by his cousin John the Baptizer.

John was busy plunging people into the Jordan River. The Greek word for "plunge" or "dip" or "splash" or even "flood" or "drown" is "*baptizo*." So they called John's plunging "*baptism*" - and they called John himself "John the Plunger," or, using the Greek word, "John the Baptizer."⁴

John the Baptist called the people of occupied Israel to step into the Jordan River in preparation for the coming "the Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world."⁵ John's baptism was not about looking good or pretending to be perfect...it was about pointing to that hole in people's soul and realizing God alone could fill it. John's baptism was about people looking around at the others standing along the river bank and realizing every person there needed what John was preparing them for. John's baptism was about honesty and salvation and liberty...a fresh slate, a turn in the right direction, a blessed new start.

If you can believe it, people flocked to the Jordan River from all over Palestine to be plunged into the river.⁶ I think it is interesting to note that so many people wanted to be identified as those in need of cleansing and forgiveness. Interesting that so many people were unashamed of their need of God.

You should know that in order to become a member of a Christian church today each of us is baptized...which means each of us publicly acknowledges not just our own sinfulness, but also our gratitude for God's gift of the church.

The church is not the kingdom of God...but it is the earthly home where we learn how to live. It is the home where we learn what it means to accept responsibility and to be held accountable. It is the home where we learn what it means to be cherished.

5

On this Baptism of the Lord Sunday, we are invited to symbolically wade into the water - not because we are entitled or because we are perfect people, but because we are able to admit how much we need what God wants to give us. Perhaps at some level we are growing into our baptism - which is to say, we realize growing in faith means responding heart and mind, body and spirit, to the largess of God.

As we slosh our way knee-deep in baptismal waters to the Lord's Table, may God fill us with a radically new and charitable way of looking at ourselves and each other. For, you see, we are all flawed and sinful creatures for whom Christ lived and died and rose again in order that we may have life with one another and with him. Amen.

3



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Endnotes:

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- ¹ Neumark, Heidi B. 2003. Breathing Space: A Spiritual Journey in the South Bronx. Boston: Beacon Press, 249.
- ² Lamott, Anne. 1999. Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith. NY: Pantheon Books, 231.
- ³ Garvey, John. 2012. "Myth & More: Why Historical Fact Isn't Enough," in *Commonweal*, January 13 issue. NY: Commonweal Foundation, 6.
- ⁴ Wright, N. T. 1998. Jesus, the Way. Worcester, PA: Christian History Institute, 11.
- ⁵ See John 1:29.
- ⁶ Wright, 11.